



## Vitafiction and Virality

### *Celebrities Fictionalizing the Self Online*

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## **Vitafiction and virality: Celebrities fictionalizing the self online**

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### **Abstract**

Celebrities playing fictionalized versions of themselves in commercials, campaigns, and video spots have become an increasingly viral phenomenon. The George Clooney commercials for Nespresso are circulated and promoted on various media platforms, segments from *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* are released on NBC.com and shared on Youtube, and some videos are explicitly created to go viral and even published on social media sites. In this article, I draw on recent work in fictionality studies and studies of virality to investigate how the celebrity trend of “vitafiction” possesses a viral potential. In vitafictional performances, the relationship between fiction and reality is thematized through a concurrent surplus of fictionality and biographical details, which invites recipients to negotiate between the celebrity’s performance and the receiver’s media cultural knowledge. Taking vitafictional performances in two online circulated spots as case studies-- “Bono rides a bike with Jimmy Fallon,” a spot for *The Tonight Show starring Jimmy*

*Fallon*, and Peter Jackson's Facebook video post "Home Invasion," a video that thematizes Jackson's role as director of an episode of *Doctor Who*--this article demonstrates how the equivocality that is central to the vitafictional performance comprises a force that prompts receivers to circulate the vitafictional message. It is argued, that the mediatization of society and the virality that this brings about create new possibilities for the impact of this kind of celebrity self-fashioning.

### **Keywords**

Virality, vitafiction, celebrity, fictionalization, self-fashioning.

### **Introduction**

Since its origin social media has been a significant arena for self-fashioning and identity explorations. Some forms of self-fashioning travel, attract attention and stimulate affective responses, while others are simply read, glanced at or forgotten. In this article I investigate the viral potential of a specific type of media platformed self-fashioning, where celebrities play fictionalized versions of themselves in order to encourage receivers to invest attention, goodwill, or money and to bring specific issues to the public's awareness.

In recent years there has been an increase in the use of this self-fashioning mode in film, TV series, and advertising (e.g. the TV series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*,

*Extras*, and *Louie* or the George Clooney Nespresso commercials). To account for this widespread media cultural phenomenon, I have suggested the term “vitafiction” (Jacobsen 2008, 2012, 2015). In vitafiction celebrities play fictionalized versions of themselves and these roles cannot be completely separated from who they are as real people. A liminal state is created in which the receiver experiences a hesitation in the form of *biographical undecidability* (Jacobsen, 2008a, 2008b). Biographical undecidability refers to the equivocal relation between real and fictional that makes the biographical value of the performance ‘undecidable’. This makes the receiver negotiate between her experience of the celebrity’s performance and her background knowledge about the celebrity. Vitafictional performances are often shared online, created to go online or directly released online. In this article, I investigate how and why celebrities’ fictionalized self-fashionings go viral, and my thesis is that the *biographical undecidability* of vitafiction possesses a viral potential, a force that prompts receivers to share the vitafictional message. The article contributes to two developing fields of research: virality and fictionality as a communicative strategy. The article provides an introduction to vitafiction’s viral potential, but it also contributes to our more general understanding of virality by providing new perspectives on the viral force of the liminal and how biographical undecidability can enhance the chance of media content going viral.

In their 2013 book, *Going Viral*, Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley define virality as

(...) a social information flow process where many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time, within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own (social) networks to different, often distant networks, resulting in a sharp acceleration in the number of people who are exposed to the message. (Nahon and Hemsley, 2013: 16)

According to this definition, virality is not all about ‘many views or likes’. It is about the *way* content spreads (Nahon and Hemsley, 2013: 28). Content goes viral through many-to-many communication, and the sociality of the spreading process is crucial. One of the reasons virality as information flow process is made possible is the existence of the many ‘weak ties’ on social networking sites (cf. Nahon and Hemsley, 2013: 32). As opposed to our strong ties (like close friends and family), weak ties carry information through to a number of interlinked networks that we are not ourselves actively involved in. We might only share a few points of interest with our many acquaintances online, but each of these acquaintances has a network consisting of strong and weak ties that ensures further spreading. This also means that viral events can create momentary networks of interest: “*a viral information*

*event creates a temporally bound, self-organized, interest network in which membership is based on an interest in the information content or in belonging to the interest network of others” (Nahon and Hemsley, 2013: 34).*

As my empirical material I have chosen two recent examples of viral vitafiction: “Bono rides a bike with Jimmy Fallon” (2015), a video created for *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, and Peter Jackson’s Facebook video post “Home Invasion” (2015), a video that thematizes rumors about Jackson directing an episode of the legendary TV series *Doctor Who*. The signatures of the information events of the videos suggest a viral information flow. They peaked shortly after their release (see Figures 1 and 2), they were shared on several social media platforms, and they both attracted a lot of attention from fans as well as the news media. They created temporary networks of interest because they resulted in people debating the future of Bono and Jackson either directly in the commentary functions or through producing other media texts. In my study of the viral potential of vitafictional self-fashioning I will first introduce the theoretical framework of vitafiction, and then, I will analyze these two examples by linking the theory of vitafiction to theories of virality. Drawing primarily on Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley’s theories on what makes content go viral (2013), I will analyze how content as well as media environmental logics are crucial factors in the creation of contagious vitafictional messages that can become the subject of intense media circulation.

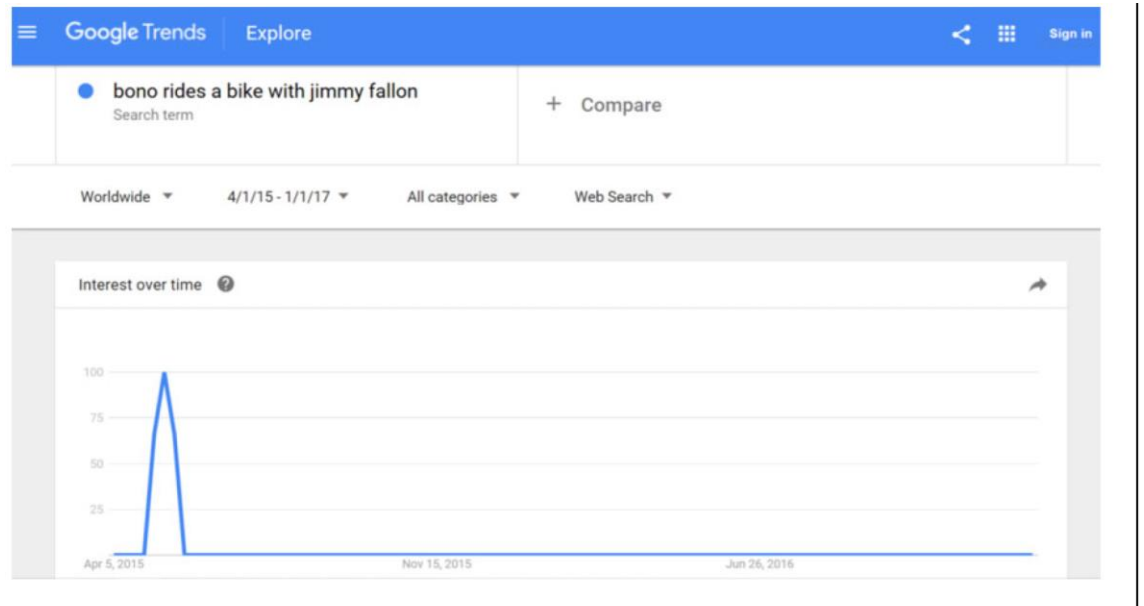


FIGURE 1: ‘Bono ride a Bike with Jimmy Fallon’. Number of views on YouTube. Google Trends (2015).

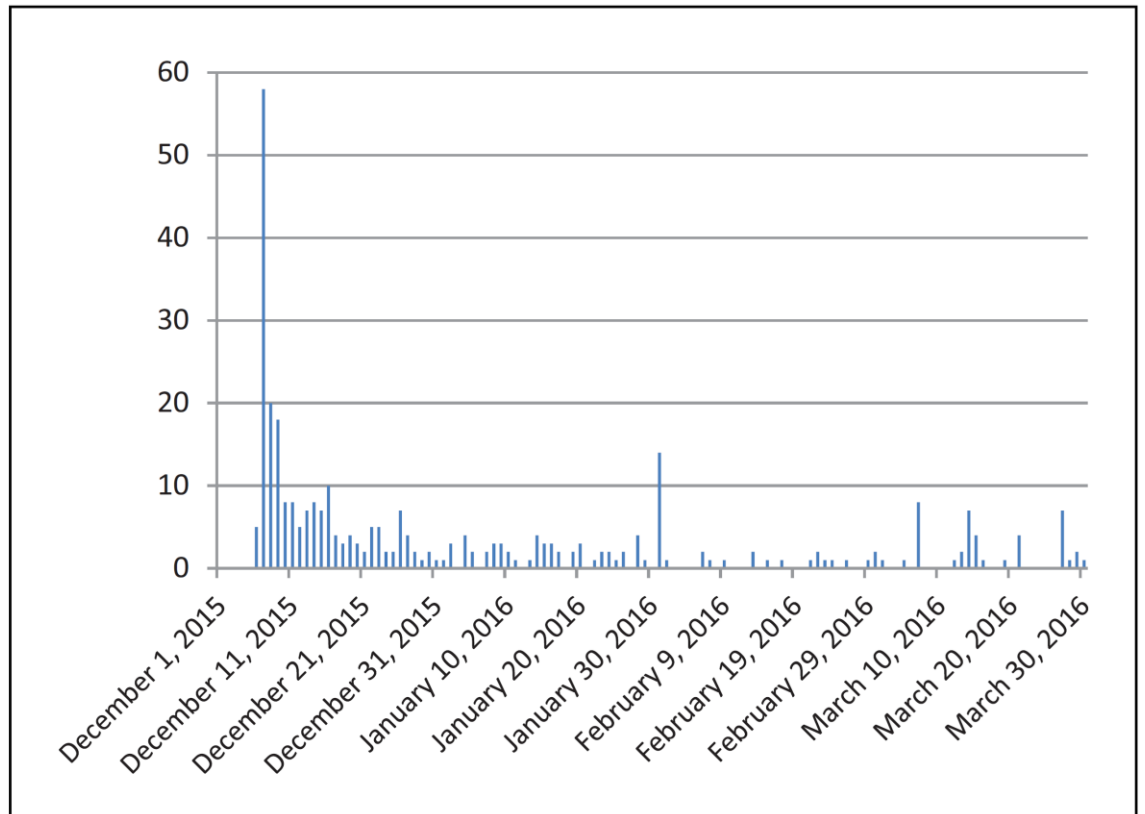


FIGURE 2: Peter Jackson: ‘Home Invasion’. Statistic based on number of views on Jackson’s Facebook page (2015).

## Vitafiction

The theoretical concept of vitafiction has been developed in the broader context of recent research into fictionality as a communication strategy (Jacobsen et al., 2013; Nielsen, Phelan and Wash 2015, Walsh 2007). Instead of dealing with fiction as a genre, the study of fictionality focuses on the rhetorical force of the invented in



various contexts. One of the benefits of approaching fictionality as a tool used for communication purposes is that it enables an attachment of fictionality to parts of a message or media text irrespective of the assumed non-fictionality of the entire message or text. Fictionality is, for example, used online and offline in our daily communication to intensify statements (“This takes forever”, “are you out of your mind”), or to express sympathy (“We are all Americans”, “We are all Norwegians”, etc.). Fictionality in the form of invented or imagined future scenarios can also be used as a rhetorical tool for persuasion in, for example, political communication (e.g. Barack Obama’s use of a passage from *The Lion King* as his birth video at the White House Correspondence Dinner 2011 or his invention of the Romnesia disease for his Speech in Fairfax, Virginia during the election campaign in 2012). Fictionality can also be applied by, for example, graphic memoirists who draw fictional versions of themselves in biographical contexts, and it is very common to use fictionality, for example, in the form of re-enactments in documentaries. The shift in focus from fiction as a genre to fictionality as communication strategy facilitates analytical as well as theoretical discussions about how and for what purposes fictionality is used strategically in different contexts, across different genres, and on different media platforms.

The mode of vitafiction is an example of fictionality used strategically across media: “In the vitafictional mode fictionality operates together with an obtrusive

surplus of biographical details (hence Curriculum Vitae).” (Jacobsen, 2015: 253).

When celebrities play themselves, their names match and typically there are other similarities such as career, family, and acquaintances. However, at the same time, fictionality is insistently applied to create events, character traits and exaggerations that do not correspond with our initial knowledge about the celebrities. This concurrency of fictionality and biographical material complicates a decoding of the performance as either clear-cut fiction or clear-cut non-fiction. If the receiver chooses to decode the performance as clear-cut fiction, a biographical surplus will be left behind obstructing or tampering with the categorization as fiction. Likewise, if the receiver tries to decode the performance as clear-cut non-fictional, the fictionality excess will thwart the unequivocality of such a categorization. The concurrent surplus of fictionality and the biographical is what creates the biographical undecidability that makes the receiver negotiate between the performance of the celebrity and what she knows about the celebrity from other media platforms. The vitafictional is intermedially founded because it operates in an interplay between the sender of the vitafictional message, the vitafictional message itself, the receiver and a number of other media texts about the celebrity and the thematized issues: “Through a continuous feedback loop between these positions, vitafiction can affect the media landscape from which it was created.” (Jacobsen, 2015: 253).

Despite the fact that vitafiction became an establish phenomena through celebrity performances in TV series in the 2000s, several precursors can be detected in various media. Buster Keaton played himself in *Sunset Blvd* in 1950, Lars von Trier made the movie *Epidemic* in 1987, where he plays the role of a movie director making a movie called 'Epidemic', and John Malkovich plays a fictionalized self-ironizing version of himself in Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* (1999). Vitafictional appearances can also be detected in early printed commercials like the Bob Hope advertisements for Pepsodent Toothpaste in the 1940s and 60s. (see also Author, Forthcoming 2018). However, the pronounced celebrity self-fictionalization in TV series from the 2000s and onwards has made vitafiction a widespread phenomenon, and, as the following analysis will show, the rapidly developing viral culture has provided a productive environment where the potential of the inherent intermediality of vitafiction can be further exploited.

A vitafictional performance requires the receiver's knowledge about the celebrities in question. To be able to play or tamper with media-circulated conceptions, the celebrity must be a part of the celebrity culture into which they perform. According to Chris Rojek, a celebrity equals impact on public consciousness. Celebrity is "the attribution of glamorous or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere." (Rojek, 2001: 10). As further stated by Holmes & Redmond, it is a defining feature of celebrity that the media pay more interest in the private life

of the celebrity than in their professional life (cf. Homes & Redmond, 2006: 11-12). This is also demonstrated by Marshall in *Celebrity and Power. Fame in Contemporary Culture* (2014). He argues that celebrity entails public intimacy, a media preoccupation with the revealing of intimate aspects of the life of the celebrity. This means that being a celebrity comes with a public knowledge about the professional work as well as the private life of the celebrity. In vitafiction it is precisely this public knowledge about the celebrities which is thematized, challenged, and negotiated. Chris Rojek uses Mead's distinction between the veridical self (I) and the self as it is seen by others (me) (Rojek, 2001: 11). In vitafiction fictionalization is used to create a sense of access to veridical selves which are otherwise inaccessible to the public. The receiver is invited into an illusory backstage arena, where we can witness celebrities in private, awkward, and embarrassing situations. The biographical dimension of vitafiction enhances a sense of authenticity, a privileged spectacle into the private life of celebrities. However, the importunate presence of fictionality that makes this vision possible in the first place also breaks the backstage illusion.

In vitafiction, celebrities can employ fictionality, usually in the form of self-irony, as a specific kind of self-fashioning strategy that can be used for identity negotiation and reality intervention. As we shall see, celebrities can use fictionalization to take on stigmatizations circulated in the media and thereby fashion their

identities. Vitafiction “provides the possibility for shaping your own real story, creating a biographical contribution through the means of fictionality” (Jacobsen, 2015: 261). Thus, the vitafictional mode entails the possibility of influencing the ‘course of life’ (*curriculum vitae*) of the celebrities. Earlier work on vitafiction, has primarily focused on the possibilities of the vitafictional mode in TV series (Jacobsen, 2008a, 2008b, 2012, 2015) and advertising contexts (Jacobsen, forthcoming). In this article, I am specifically interested in what makes this kind of self-fashioning travel across media and go viral.

Vitafiction can go viral in several ways. It can go viral because it is remediated by fans or it can be explicitly created to go viral from the onset and be posted on social media sites. There are numerous examples of teasers and trailers for vitafictional TV series that have gone viral, and very often, fans will post and circulate clips from their favorite TV series. A prominent example of this is the TV series *Extras* (2005-2007). In *Extras*, celebrities such as Kate Winslet, Orlando Bloom and Daniel Radcliffe play exaggerated and often very obnoxious versions of themselves. Kate Winslet admits that she is doing a Holocaust movie to win an Oscar, Orlando Bloom is desperately trying to prove that he is more attractive than Johnnie Depp, and Daniel Radcliffe is pathetically trying to distance himself from the Harry Potter character. By exaggerating and thus explicitly thematizing their reputations and gossip about them circulating in the media, Winslet, Bloom and

Radcliffe are not only creating a self-irony based humor, but they are also negotiating media-produced conceptions of them. Vitafictional TV series are produced to be watched on TV or through net streaming services. Even though these shows are not published online and inherently intended to go viral, they can be promoted online and clips with viral potential can be chosen for advertising. Furthermore, online fan culture based on viral logics can be developed.

If we turn to advertising, the vitafictional mode is applied in numerous commercials produced in various contexts. Prototypical examples of vitafictional advertising are George Clooney for Nespresso (2006-), Brad Pitt for *Heineken* (2005), Scarlett Johansson for *Dolce & Gabbana* (2010), Jerry Seinfeld and Jay Leno for *Acura NSX* (2012), and Madonna for *BMW* (2001).<sup>1</sup> The commercials can, for example, be launched as cinema or TV commercials, they can be produced for special events like the Superbowl or they can be crossmedially designed to persuade the customer through a combination of billboards, TV commercials and video spots circulated via social network sites. As noted by Van Dyck (2014) and others, the advertising industry is facing a number of challenges such as customers' increasing annoyance with advertising and the lack of confidence in brands. Strategies such as humor have been applied to conceal the monetizing of advertising (see, e.g. Stigel, 2008), and as investigated by Nahon and Hemsley (2013), commercials must be

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to vitafictional advertising see Grumsen and Jacobsen (Forthcoming).

remarkable and possess certain qualities in order to engage people and go viral. The George Clooney commercials for Nespresso are examples of vitafictional advertising being circulated and promoted on various media platforms. The commercials have become a viral phenomenon, and they have created online crowds based on enthusiastic dedication as well as critical debates about sustainability.

The vitafictional mode can also function as a viral campaigning strategy as we see it in the political example of Barack Obamas ‘Couch Commander’ video for his last White House Correspondent’s Dinner (2016). In the video, Obama plays a fictionalized version of himself clearly making fun of matters, critics have used against him such as the birth certificate affair from 2011. Although videos such as ‘Couch Commander’ are produced to be screened at the White House Correspondent’s Dinner, several of the videos are shared and debated on social networking sites.

Vitafiction can be explicitly created to go viral and even released on social media sites. Segments from *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* are available on NBC.com and shared via NBC’s Youtube channel and Facebook page. Peter Jackson’s “Home Invasion” was produced to be released on the director’s own Facebook profile from which it has been shared and spread across multiple media platforms. In the following I will focus on this form of viral vitafiction.

## **Vitafiction going viral: Bono and Jackson**

*Bono rides a bike with Jimmy Fallon*

*The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* is a popular American late night talk show. It is aired on NBC but segments of the show are also available for streaming on NBC.com. Every week some of the most famous celebrities are guests on the show where different relevant topics are covered and debated in an ironic and humorous atmosphere. Each show includes, as an entertainment highlight, a video or a planned-in-studio performance starring Jimmy Fallon and the guests. Several of these segments have gone viral on social network sites such as Facebook and YouTube. Among these are, for example, *The Magazine Cover Talk* with Billy Crystal, *Breakdance Conversation* with Brad Pitt and *The Evolution of Hip-Hop Dancing* with Will Smith. One of the things that makes these segments stand out from the rest of the show is the celebrities' vitafictional performances. They clearly perform as themselves, but at the same time, fictionality is used strategically to create humorous content and to comment on and make us further reflect on relevant issues regarding the celebrities themselves and/or societal issues foregrounding in the segments. A similar example where vitafictional performances are used in segments of a talk show is *The Late Late Show with James Corden*. In his concept of 'Carpool Karaoke' and especially in videos like "Tom's Cruise on the River Thames Corden" (2017) and "James Corden's Journey to The Late Late Show"



(2015) narratives are built around celebrity biographies, and celebrities such as Tom Cruise, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Jay Leno self-ironically thematize their celebrity status. These videos have millions of hits and have obtained substantial virality.

In May 2015, U2 visited *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*. The visit was originally scheduled for November 2014 but because of front man Bono's serious bike accident in New York the band had to cancel the engagement. Bono was severely injured. He broke his arm in six places and fractured his eye socket, hand and shoulder blade, and it is still not clear whether or not he will be able to play the guitar again. The accident was the subject of massive media coverage, and since the injuries are potentially threatening to Bono's career, the matter is an obvious target for gossip and speculation.

Jimmy Fallon opens *The Tonight Show* with a recording of what is called "Bono's first bike ride after the accident". In the video we see a bike parked on the sidewalk outside the NBC studios. Accompanied by Richard Strauss' *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Bono appears in slow motion, looking very serious and determined. He gets on his bike and is then joined by Jimmy Fallon on a small girlish bicycle. They look at each other, nodding knowingly and exaggeratedly, and then they take off. They ride on the sidewalk, and almost immediately Bono is not paying attention and drives directly into the street, where he is hit by a car. He gets up and is really relieved, but all he gets to say is "that was a close o . . ." and then he is hit again.

Jimmy Fallon says, “oh no. Bono are you okay?”, and Bono answers “I’m good, Jimmy. Just a couple of scratches. I’m ready to do the sho . . . ” and then he is run over a third time. Finally, it is revealed that it is his own band that has run him over repeatedly in an attempt to find a parking spot.

This appearance is a case of vitafiction. Bono, Fallon and the band play fictionalized versions of themselves. We have an intrusive biographical surplus due to name resemblance, the social relations between Fallon, Bono and his band, and the theme of the bicycle accident. However, fictionality is equally intrusive: Bono is exaggerating his gestures, and it is obvious that it is a doll that is run over, it happens too many times, and he is run over by his own band. Furthermore, the music underscores the exaggerated behavior and the forced solemnity of the situation.

In this video, the concurrent surplus of fictionality and the biographical is used to display and mock the celebrity status of Bono and U2. Bono is wearing his prototypical rock star outfit in a slightly overdone manner. He is ignorantly not paying attention to the traffic, and he deliberately looks awkward with his characteristic sunglasses crooked and an “I don’t get it” expression on his face. When Bono uses fictionality to perform as an ignorant and awkward-looking rock star (and at the same time remaining Bono from U2), he positions himself as an actor who is not afraid to admit weaknesses and make fun of himself. This means that he possesses the very sympathetic character trait of self-irony.

Bono is known for his environmental and humanitarian work including fighting poverty and AIDS in Africa. In March 2002, he was, for example, on the front cover of TIME Magazine under the headline: “Can Bono save the world? Don’t laugh – The globe’s biggest rock star is on a mission to make a difference” (see also Tyrangiel, 2002). Riding a bike has become one of the ways, celebrities can make environmental statements, and the inconvenience of bike riding in big cities such as New York seem to underline cycling as an environmental choice. Bono riding a bike supports his image as a green advocate, but in the Fallon video, it is humorously displayed how this image (and the accident which the environmental statement caused) does not always seem to match the rock star coolness of Bono. Thus, in the video Bono performs a self-mockery which reveals a self-ironizing approach to his actions as well as to the media portrayed image of him as a cool green rock star. Furthermore, when Bono is making an event out of him getting back on the bike, he addresses what the world around him is speculating about: Is he or is he not in control of things? How will he get his career back on track? How will he be able to talk about the accident? In the video Bono situates his performance in this unresolved relationship between his celebrity persona and the known biographical material. He is taking on a negative traumatic experience and uses it as part of a deliberately embarrassing self-mocking behavior. Being self-ironizing about the accident and his image indicates a mental surplus, a self-reflexivity that

removes Bono from his position as a victim and tells us he is back on track. In this video the interplay between character and real person and the biographical undecidability this brings about makes it possible to comment on serious career threatening matters and further negotiate rumors and identity.

*Peter Jackson: Home invasion: This was an interesting weekend*

In a time with various rumors circulating in the media about whether or not Peter Jackson would direct an episode of the legendary BBC science fiction TV series *Doctor Who*, Jackson posts a video on his Facebook page. It is recorded in his home in New Zealand and primarily presents an interaction between him and his daughter Katie. Jackson is polishing his Oscar statues and Katie confronts him with an email from Steven Moffat, the writer and producer of *Doctor Who*. Apparently, Jackson has not been responding to Moffat's emails about directing an episode of the show. Jackson mockingly answers: "I reply to the ones I can understand (...) but some are a bit incoherent. You know like his scripts. There's great ones there are some that are . . . not great". Jackson continues the mocking by pointing to the problems of Moffat's productiveness:

He is running *Doctor Who* at 10 o'clock in the morning. At 11: gotta do *Sherlock*.  
Bangs down an email to Peter Jackson (...) Have you seen Steven Moffat recently  
(...) He was pale, he was stressed. Couldn't answer the names of his wife and kids.

Suddenly the Doctor from *Doctor Who* enters Jackson's living room. He is played by the actor Peter Capaldi, who plays the twelfth and current doctor in *Doctor Who*. Apparently, Steve Moffat sent out his fictive character to make Jackson sign a director's contract. The Doctor from *Doctor Who* is a time-travelling humanoid alien, and towards the end of the video he is chased away by a Dalek (an extraterrestrials characteristic of the *Doctor Who* show). Jackson and his daughter do not pay attention to this rather unusual scenario. They do not even seem to know who is actually visiting them. This is shown in a dialogue that also contains a metatextual wordplay:

Jackson: And who are you exactly? (...)

Doctor Who: I'm the doctor

Jackson: Who?

Doctor Who: Correct

They think the Doctor is a *Doctor Who* fan, and when he is chased away by the Dalek they think the noise stems from the TV showing the *Doctor Who* series. This makes them very happy because *Doctor Who* night means that *The Living Dead* is showing on another channel.

In the video the biographical surplus is intrusive. Peter Jackson plays himself. He has the same name, job and family relations as in real life. There is a *Hobbit* coffee mug on the table, he is demonstratively polishing his Oscars, and he mentions he has been titled ‘Sir Peter’. However, fictionality is used strategically to comment on at least two types of media circulated content. One is the stigmatization of Jackson’s persona and the other is rumors about the *Doctor Who* episode.

Like Bono, Jackson thematizes his celebrity status. In the video, he is extremely self-absorbed and self-satisfied, putting forward all of his public acknowledgements. Through the use of fictionality, Jackson performs as exactly the person several rumors claim he has become: a self-indulgent director who is milking the industry (cf. for example Frohnen, 2014; Chitwood, 2014). Jackson’s performance can be described as a form of “rhetorical judo” because he is using his opponents’ arguments to his own advantage (cf. Jacobsen, 2015). Through the use of self-irony Jackson appears self-reflexive. By acknowledging rumors and a bad reputation he positions himself as a celebrity who is not afraid to face the downside of fame. Fictionality in the form of self-irony is used to negotiate media-circulated stigmatizations.

When the fictional Doctor enters Jackson’s home, fictionality quite literally invades the seemingly biographical. This meeting feeds rumors about Jackson directing an episode, and it maintains fans’ interest in the project. At the end of the

video, we do experience not only biographical undecidability – we are left behind in a state of equivocality because instead of closing the deal by signing the contract, Jackson provides the content to start yet another rumor. The Tolkien book *The Silmarillion* is on the table, full of pink post-it notes. Fans have been hoping for a *Silmarillion* movie, but the Tolkien estate will not sell the film rights (Flint, 2014). When analyzing the commentary section below the video, it is made clear that the video restarted these speculations and a discussion developed on whether or not Jackson should engage in such a project (Stuff, 2015). Fans are joining in on the conversation with comments like:

“Is that The Silmarillion all bookmarked on the table? 😊”

“Silmarrillion [sic] would be a glorious tv series”

“Interesting choice of book to have bookmarked, Peter.”

“either Peter Jackson is doing an ep of Doctor Who orrrrr he's prepping to pitch The Silmarillion... Or both. Regardless, i'm [sic] tickled.”

“So... does this mean you ARE making an episode of Dr Who? Or is this a sneaky attempt to try to get to direct an episode of The Walking Dead?”

As these comments and conversations show, the equivocality of the message sparks speculations, feeds rumors and creates online networks where these

matters can be discussed. This also stresses how fans share the content of the video as part of a conversation and that the video in itself can initiate conversations. In this case, vitafiction becomes a cultural artifact around which socializing happens. The commentary section on Peter Jackson's Facebook page also reflects how fans share content in a cheerful, elated atmosphere.

"The amount of excitement I felt watching Capaldi walk into the scene is indescribable."

"I'm the Doctor. -Who? -Correct. Hahaha 😄"

"Oh my God. Yesterday I watched episode 9x11 of Doctor Who and then the extras of BOFA EE. This video can't be real. My two favourite Peter together ❤️"

Fans are enjoying how the videos are well put together. They share, laugh and enjoy the many extra-textual references that can be decoded and discussed with other fans in a virally established community.

The analysis of "Bono rides a bike with Jimmy Fallon" and Jackson's "Home Invasion" shows that through vitafictional undecidability celebrities can comment on, advertise for, and create self-narration around urgent or delicate real-life matters.



## **Vitafiction and virality**

In their book on celebrities Holmes and Redmond pinpoint how “[n]ew and old media technologies have enabled stars and celebrities to be endlessly circulated, replayed, downloaded and copied.” (Holmes and Redmond, 2006: 4). This development offers new possibilities for self-fashioning and identity negotiation across media platforms. According to José van Dijck the interconnection of platforms creates a new infrastructure, where each social media platform comprises a “microsystem” and all media platforms can be regarded as an “ecosystem of connective media” (van Dijck, 2013: 21). This means that there are immense possibilities for spreadability across platforms within the ecosystem. For van Dijck, it is also essential that there are different interests within the system and that these interests operate across a top-down/bottom-up distinction. Social media can be regarded as a domain filled with tensions and struggles between financial and non-financial interests, and the users of social media combine the roles as citizens, peers and consumers (cf. van Dijck, 2013:18).

In line with van Dijck’s perspectives on the crossover of interests in the ecosystem, Nahon and Hemsley argue that the nature of virality is shaped by a complex blurring of top-down and bottom-up forces, combined with the structure of networks (cf. Nohan and Hemsley, 2013: 41f). The top-down force is based on the

process of gatekeeping. Content goes viral because powerful networks or actors promote it. This force is usually (and often negatively) associated with virality as promotion. This top-down explanation is important for understanding parts of the viral logic of vitafiction. The performer is a celebrity who is already the center of media attention and thereby has the power to affect consumers. It cannot be denied that the videos on Bono's bike ride and Jackson's home invasion can be seen as promotion that draws attention to Bono and Jackson as celebrities, to their professional work and to their affiliates – in this case Jimmy Fallon, NBC, and the production team behind *Doctor Who*. There is, however, a chance that the promotional aspect will be downplayed by the humor and irony of the videos. As suggested by Jørgen Stigel (2008), humour in advertising “*distracts* attention from the fact that advertising is an uninvited address intended to direct and persuade” (Stigel, 2008: 36, original emphasis). Research in vitafiction shows that “the vitafictional performance can be used to downplay the obvious financial benefits of celebrity endorsement because the identity negotiation, which is closely tied to understanding the joke, becomes center of attention.” (Grumsen and Jacobsen, Forthcoming). Thus, in the Bono and Jackson cases, top-down explanations cannot be overlooked, but the nature of the vitafictional message can potentially avoid a foregrounding of these gatekeeping processes in the receiver's decoding of the message.

Virality can also be explained through the structural logics of the media network. Media platforms are designed to promote already popular content, and this means that a limited number of media users typically get all the viral attention. We see this logic in the virality of the videos because *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* is already trending and has already produced numerous viral hits, and because Bono and Peter Jackson are celebrities around whom lots of media-shared content already exists.

At the heart of Nahon and Hemsley's theory lies their bottom-up-explanation that focuses on patterns of human attention and sharing. They argue that content goes viral when it can "overcome our resistance to sharing it" (Nahon and Hemsley, 2013: 61). The content must be 'remarkable' in the sense that we find it extraordinary and "worth remarking on with the people we are connected to" (Nahon and Hemsley, 2013: 62). A message is likely to go viral if it is surprising or new to us, if it is something we can easily relate to, if it is contextually important (e.g. its newsworthiness) and if it creates emotional or humorous impact. All of Nahon and Hemsley's characteristics apply to the Bono and Jackson videos, but they stand out through an interlinking of context, surprise, and humor.

If we look at the context, both videos have a certain newsworthiness to them in the sense that they comment on current media content. In order to fully grasp the

content, the receiver must possess a contextual knowledge about Bono's bike accident and about Peter Jackson's previous work, his awards and ennoblement, and the *Doctor Who* series and the rumors relating to it.

A certain surprise-effect is created through both videos. Bono is repeatedly run over by a car and Jackson is visited by a fictive character. It can also be argued that their exaggerated self-satisfied behavior is surprising because it is something one would typically avoid underlining in public. The surprise effect stems from the concurrent surplus of fictionality and the biographical, because in both videos fictionality is used as a communication tool to make the unexpected happen. This creates a contextually grounded humor through incongruence (Carroll, 2014; Chritchley, 2002) because fictionality becomes intrusive in an otherwise biographically and geographically recognizable environment. Continuing on the humor perspective, Nahon and Hemsley state: "Researchers have found that humor is certainly one of the elements that can help content go viral" (Nahon and Hemsley, 2013: 65). Vitafictional performances are often humiliatingly funny – but it is a humor that springs from the biographical undecidability. When celebrities use fictionality to exaggerate what is debated in the media, they use the transition between role and real person to create self-irony.

Thus, the viral potential of surprise, humor, and the contextual are all interlinked and deeply rooted in the intertwining of fictionality and biographical material. Undecidability becomes the core in determining the viral potential of vitafiction. Nahon and Hemsley mention that existing rumors can help something become a viral topic (cf. Nahon and Hemsley, 2013: 54). Rumors are inherently undecidable, and they play a crucial role in vitafiction. This connection accounts for the viral potential of undecidability. According to Allport and Postman (1948), it is the lack of clarifying information that makes people gossip and thereby create rumors. Thus, relevance and ambiguity are the two basic conditions in rumor making (Allport and Postman, 1948: 33f). The nature of gossip is sharing undecided information in social networks. Rumors are on the verge of determination, they consist of information that is about to be fixed, and thus, they comprise the ideal gossip material. Vitafictional performances can influence this process and use the unfixed as an advantage. As the case studies have shown, it is the sustained lack of resolution between the performance and known biography that impels reflexivity and identity negotiation. The power of the uncertain and not yet determined can be used to generate a circulative force where the receivers share and discuss in order to know more and actively engage in what is about to gain substance. In the vitafictional message, receivers are activated and motivated to share through a captivating undecidability. Vitafiction is a concept that operates in liminal spaces (Jacobsen, 2015: 253).

Through the concurrent surplus of fictionality and the biographical, a prolific hesitation emerges and the vitafictional message can become the subject of discussions and speculations. The undecidedness of vitafiction therefore makes vitafiction inherently shareable. When vitafiction goes online, the gossiping potential can unfold across media and create a very potent viral environment.

The intermedial foundation of vitafiction entails a narrative structure that seems to align very well with the nature of gossip and hence its spreadability and viral potential. A vitafictional narrative is stretched and created across media borders, because it is reliant on the receiver's knowledge about the celebrities obtained from various media sources. We are offered knowledge about celebrities on a still increasing number of media platforms, and often this knowledge flourish side by side with our own social online interaction and self-fashioning. Thus, knowledge about celebrities and the sharing of this knowledge is interweaved in our daily online conversational practice. Vitafiction draws on knowledge developed in this environment, but at the same time, it also feeds back into and develops this very environment from which it was founded in the first place. Through the inherent undecidability, every vitafictional performance thus seems to possess a potential for conversational spreadability, but when vitafiction is created specifically to be published directly into our online routines, the vitafictional undecidability is immediately actualized in an interplay with the viral affordances of connective media.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of this analysis of viral vitafiction is to investigate how and why vitafictional performances go viral. As shown in the case studies, the vitafictional mode possesses the characteristics that Nahon and Hemsley list as important for virality. Top-down and bottom-up forces as well as the structure of the media network help vitafiction go viral. Surprise, humorous and emotional impact, as well as the contextual newsworthiness create a potent viral environment. These viral characteristics seem to be interrelated and deeply rooted in the undecidability inherent in the narrative mode of vitafiction: the intertwining of fictionality and the biographical generates an undecidability that can feed rumors, maintain interest in a certain topic, and overcome our resistance to share.

The vitafictional contains a number of advantages for the celebrity and everyone else involved in the production. The celebrities can use the vitafictional for self-fashioning purposes and thereby negotiate the media-circulated images of them. By using fictionality strategically together with a biographical surplus, they can appear as humorous, self-ironizing, courageous individuals that are not afraid to admit weaknesses and put their reputations on the line. These character traits indicate the possession of social capital and thus there is the possibility that the celebrities might achieve a form of modern catharsis through self-irony (Jacobsen,

2015: 263). The video and the goodwill and investment they bring about can also be very beneficial for the production companies and other involved parties. To NBC and to Jimmy Fallon, the viral sections of *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* comprise a very effective promotion strategy, and to Peter Jackson's production team and everyone involved in the production of the *Doctor Who* series the video entails a new form of media coverage that can revive the engagement of fans of *Doctor Who* as well as Jackson's movies. It can also potentially expand the respective fan cultures and make new groups of receivers seek out information about Jackson's and Moffat's productions. The undecidability of vitafiction and the complex address of contextual material encourage the receiver to partake in discussions and speculations that can be realized directly in the commentary functions. This provides a participatory dimension and a feel of being able to partake in the creation of media content.

This investigation of vitafiction and virality shows that the transformative power of the vitafictional can be exploited in new ways in a viral environment. Vitafiction is dependent on a liminal logic, a state of transition that seems to intensify the engagement of the receiver. Future research in vitafiction and virality can therefore engage further in this audience activation by exploding theories of viral contagion and affect as we see it in the work of Grusin (2010), Sampson (2012), Stage, Knudsen (2012), and Stage (2013, 2017). Especially Anna Munster's work



on the affective viral potential of “transitory experiences” (Munster, 2013) comprise an interesting study of liminal states that can give insight into new possibilities for the impact of vitafictional performances. The study of vitafiction as self-fashioning strategy can contribute to research in virality and potentially to different areas within the field of affect studies. It provides new perspectives on the force of the transitory and how a concurrency of fictionality and the biographical can enhance the chance of media content going viral.

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